**EFFECTIVE ADAPTATION IN THE VISUAL ART CLASSROOM**

Visual art classes in schools are often project-based; students are given a task and assessed on how well they complete it. For students with disabilities, there can be many barriers to participating in such an assignment, including a lack of access or a sensory aversion to the materials provided.

Adaptive arts specialists like Susan Loesl see students with disabilities struggling in art classrooms every day and work with educators to make their lessons accessible to everyone. Loesl, an adaptive arts specialist/arts therapist with the Milwaukee Public Schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, says her job is to help students access any art-making task. She does this by always looking at the students’ strengths first and building on that.

“Teachers usually think from the art task first. [Then they say,] ‘Oh no, my student can’t do this.’” says Loesl. She goes on to explain that simply expanding the types of art-making materials used for a task often provides the accessibility that a student with a disability needs. “Traditional oil pastels might not be the right tool [for that student], but a twist-up soft crayon will work because the handle is larger and more sturdy. When teachers open up a task, students can usually participate more independently.”

Lisa Bartoli, executive director and founder of Art Therapy Express Program, Inc. in Delaware, agrees that successful adaptation in the art classroom starts with identifying a student’s strengths. For example, for students with physical disabilities, Bartoli recommends looking at any movement they have first and then finding adaptations that work with their movement.

Adaptive technologies to assist students with disabilities abound these days, but both Losel and Bartoli find that simple adaptive tools can be very successful in the art classroom. Bartoli says that adapting art-making tools is often about thinking outside the box. She explains, “I am all about finding ways you can get the paint onto the canvas. If the student cannot hold onto a brush but has a wide grasp, maybe a Styrofoam ball or tennis ball on the end of the brush will help.”

Loesl, who is known in her school district for having over 60 pairs of [*adaptive scissors*](http://thejohnfkennedycenterfortheperformingarts.cmail1.com/t/r-l-cgzc-tilipuhdj-z/), agrees that adaptations do not need to be overly complicated or expensive. “You can adapt almost anything with masking tape and newspaper!” she exclaims when discussing the topic. Still, Loesl admits that the perceived cost of adaptive tools is a barrier for many educators.

“There is a lack of adaptive equipment awareness,” Losel says, “…and teachers feel like they need to deal with what they have.” To address this challenge in the Milwaukee Public Schools District, she has put[*handouts about arts adaptation*](http://thejohnfkennedycenterfortheperformingarts.cmail1.com/t/r-l-cgzc-tilipuhdj-v/) and [*adaptive tools*](http://thejohnfkennedycenterfortheperformingarts.cmail1.com/t/r-l-cgzc-tilipuhdj-e/)online to help empower the teachers.

Bartoli has also had success in recruiting community partners to create the same tools that are expensive to purchase. For instance, students in a high school carpentry workshop helped build a spinning table and easel for her art students with disabilities. She found engineering students at a local university similarly eager to help.

Utilizing the human resources at schools, like the occupational and physical therapists, is also important to Bartoli. When a student requires an adaptation, Bartoli says, “I talk with the [therapists], the people who really know the students, and get their input. That’s when the magic happens, when everyone puts ideas together and works as a team.”

Loesl and Bartoli agree that letting students be independent is critical to successful adaptation. According to Loesl, “So often the art teachers and the special education support staff have this idea that if the student is making art and it doesn’t look good, ‘I’m a bad helper.’” But in reality, Loesl says the student engagement process is much more important than the product. She explains, “Students with disabilities…lack so many opportunities to have practice with the various art processes. It’s so specifically task-oriented. If we let the students be more process-engaged, it’s win-win for everybody.”

**5 TIPS FOR USING ADAPTED VISUAL ART TOOLS FOR STUDENTS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES**

By Lisa Bartoli

All students benefit from creating art as a vehicle for self-expression and self-exploration. When an individual has severe physical disabilities, it is often necessary to devise adaptations so that he or she can physically manipulate the art-making materials.

1. *Find simple but effective adaptations for students with little or no hand grasp*. For example, the educator can utilize a universal cuff to hold a shortened paintbrush. Brushes, markers, or crayons inserted into foam tubing provide comfort and success. Model Magic air-drying clay may also be molded around a paintbrush or drawing implement; since the clay is pliable, it will form to the artist’s hand. Inexpensive devices such as styrofoam balls or tennis balls also provide a larger surface that is easier for the individual to grasp.

2. I*f the student has no strength in their hands, encourage them to make art in another way*. A paintbrush can be attached to a hat, a headstick, or a mouthstick. Try footpainting in a therapeutic swing to merge art and therapy.

3. *Introduce the idea of a unique paint utensil*, like using a large array of textured balls dipped into paint then tossed into a kiddie pool or low box. Textured cleaning mitts and/or shower puffs from the dollar store yield beautiful Monet-like paintings.

4. *A student’s position is imperative* in supporting their ability to perform any fine motor activity. Arm skates can promote ease of motion and arm slings attached to an IV pole allow students to create masterpieces freely.

5. *Think outside of the box.*  Make paint fly through the air using medicine syringes, mustard and ketchup bottles, squirt bottles, turkey basters, or squirt guns. Create an engaging connection to a distant painting on the floor using a paint roller on a pole, a wheelchair roller, or paint pogos. To kick it up a notch, make the painting move with a spinning easel. Empower the young artist to propel paint onto the canvas in exciting, limitless ways!

*Lisa Bartoli is the founder and executive director of*[*Art Therapy Express Program, Inc.*](http://thejohnfkennedycenterfortheperformingarts.cmail1.com/t/r-l-cgzc-tilipuhdj-s/)*With over 30 years experience as a registered art therapist, Lisa has worked with thousands of children and adults with physical, intellectual, and emotional disabilities in schools, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, and her own adapted art studio. She is currently incorporating her years of research and enthusiasm into creating learning manuals that support teachers, therapists, and parents.*